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The Avant-garde versus the Moderns: the Situationist International

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- 1 For a long time the historiographer has only had access to two versions of the facts: the Situationists were a legend and, as we know, legend is what gets into print; or one goes along with the official version which Guy Debord, for the most part, provided by writing his own memoirs. For some years the boundaries have been shifting, and are now redrawn based on the history of modernity. It should be added that there has been an upsurge of publications, thus making the gilded legend more complex and prompting the most orthodox of interpretations to a greater rationality.
- 2 This is the angle of Fabien Danesi's book, which stands somewhat aloof from these categories, and dodges pious intimations. For all this, though, it is not devoid of difficulties—quite to the contrary—in aptly unravelling the break between art and politics, which kept the Situationists out of reach of any overarching vision. Those who deride aesthetics will hail dull retrieval, while historians will see therein a sociology of the avant-garde, rather than any far-reaching questioning of the Situationists' "anti-art". The scope of the book and its montage of the various periods shed light on the main issue: the

mythology of a movement that wanted no heirs, and which ended up becoming a major influence. The author places himself right away after that end of art, decreed by Debord, but the pull of the original “shattered myth” helps him to topple in turn towards the central matter of the denial of the artwork in the name of “totality”.

- 3 The symptom that F. Danesi brings out is the clash between Situationists and moderns—Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jean-Luc Godard, not forgetting Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, and the Nouveau Roman [New Novel]. The breaks with the Happening, and every other modernist movement, hallmarked the Situationists at least as much as their progressive determination to shift the promises of art into humdrum or historical life, depending on the formula desired. Their gestures of “de-creation” (Giorgio Agamben) *caused idle hands* at the same time as they created processes which went beyond the art history of the avant-gardes. F. Danesi’s book attempts to broach these challenges to the notion of opus, without always seeing its messianic range, which the author incidentally challenges, unlike Agamben. Metagraphs, slippage, psychogeography, situational constructions and, above all, appropriation and hijack cannot be understood without this messianism, which, in the end of the day, is close to Walter Benjamin and the Marx of the “critique of value” and the “fetishism of merchandise”. But his project prompts him to mark the points of rupture and more often of continuity between the Situationists and some of their contemporaries (Henri Lefebvre, Socialisme and Barbarie). Beyond the flop of the revolutionary myth of the Situationists, F. Danesi triggers a new retrospective reading. It suggests that a history of art henceforth can no longer be sparing with the Situationist International.
- 4 Were there need for proof of as much, it would suffice to open Libero Andreotti’s *Le Grand jeu à venir: textes situationnistes sur la ville*, devoted to unitary city-planning, i.e. the transformation of the urban decor in favour of enthusiasms, games, disorientation and adventure (utopian urbanism that was defined at the crossroads of Cobra, Debord’s Lettrist International and Asger Jorn’s Imaginist Bauhaus). L. Andreotti’s book brings together the main Situationist writings on the city, wherein lies the interest, by way of periods going beyond the group’s formal existence (1957-1972).
- 5 Gérard Berréby has at the same time published, with Allia, a book focused on the unusual characters giving a true dimension to the movement. With Piet de Groof, the International’s activities were organized through a whole swathe of northern European activity, more precisely gravitating around Jorn and Cobra. These are valuable interviews and conversations (Wyckaert, Pinot Gallizio and the Taptoe gallery). *Le Général situationniste* exhumes the links between the early Situationists and the movements issuing from *Revolutionary Surrealism*, and artists such as Dotremont, Enrico Baj and Yves Klein, prior to radicalization and after 1960. The rare and unpublished documents published by Allia in this book are part and parcel of the Situationist aesthetics turning opus into document, while the status of the document replaced art. They are to be resituated in the series of publications bringing out certain crucial reports and careers in order to understand Debord and the Situationists. One thinks of Jean-Michel Mension’s *La Tribu*, Ralph Rumney’s *Le Consul, Défense de mourir*, writings and catalogue, by Gil J. Wolman, and very recently the extraordinary investigative work of Boris Donné and Jean-Marie Apostolides on an essential period for the formation of the International, around Patrick Straram and Ivan Chitchevlov. Allia fills a gap which is more and more akin to that Alexandrian Library where the Situationists published major writings in their corpus,

apart from one: the volume planned by Debord on the previous genealogy leading to the foundation of the group, since the historical Lettrism of Isidore Isou.

- 6 What is thus involved is a continent whose history is not yet in the can, but arriving in chunks. The catalogue *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni: the Situationist International (1957-1972)* encompasses its shortcomings and qualities. It may not overlook incorporating (despite its limiting title) certain significant figures in Lettrism such as Gabriel Pomerand, Jean-Louis Brau and Ivan Chtcheglov, but, conversely, it spills over into the realm of movements and artists who had precious little to do with the Situationists. There is that other danger here of mixing genres, and blurring the historical theatre of operations of the avant-gardes positing the end of art.